



PORTRAIT: ROBERT REDFORD

The Politics and Pleasures of Managing a Western Landscape

By Judith Thurman



BRENT BECK

Since he first acquired land in Utah, Robert Redford has sought to balance limited development of the wilderness with its preservation. "My interest in *Out of Africa*—in the character I played and in the book—was the notion that we don't really own anything in nature, that we're only passing through."

WHEN YOU SAVE A LIFE, goes the old saying, you're responsible for it. "That's true in spades when you've saved a place," says Robert Redford. "I bought Sundance to preserve it, and I found myself, like preservationists everywhere, in the development game. The only way to protect nature is to manage it like a business—in fact, to *make* it a business and devote your life to it. And that was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. I've heard Sundance described as my 'private Shangri-la.' " He tilts his

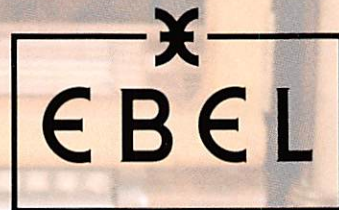
Redford considers Sundance "a working paradox that needs constant adjustment."

chair back and laughs. "It's been a nightmare."

More than thirty years have passed since a working-class college boy from Los Angeles, who wasn't yet "Redford," first camped out in the mountains above Provo, which weren't yet "Sundance," the Utah ski resort and arts community he founded beginning in 1969 (see *Architectural Digest*, June 1992). "I saw the landscape pretty much as the first settlers did, and it was paradise. Much later—I'd begun acting on television—I bought two acres and built a house on them. In winter you only had access by snowshoe, and I made the trek alone because my kids weren't walking yet. When the first snowmobiles came on the market I got one—it meant I could bring my family up for Christmas. It took me five trips to install us: two for the luggage, then the groceries, then the firewood and finally the kids. Our life here in those days was very simple. There was no phone. We melted snow for water. We had to keep the fire going or we'd freeze. You know why it was such an idyll? Because of its hardships." He looks around his well-upholstered office, humming with faxes and steam heat, and laughs some more. "Ease corrupts you, and it's so hard to resist."

By now, Redford is as famous for his resistance—his activism—as he is for his movies. He has been an aggressive champion of the environment, and not only from on high. He is as informed on the subject of water service districts and sewer systems as he is on the politics of energy in the West. "Nostalgia is futile. I'm impatient with the armchair romantics who content themselves with the Ralph Lauren version of the Old West. And I'm impatient too with a certain kind of idealism. It doesn't do any good to take the high moral ground with people who feel their livelihoods are at stake. They need a financial incentive. The African wildlife preservationists have arrived at the same conclusion. They have to give the farmers an incentive to protect the game, and tourism is that incentive. The same is true here of the wilderness. I would have loved to leave Sun-

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dance the way I found it, and the way it looked a hundred years ago, but that was impossible—there are no more private nature preserves. We've tried to strike a balance between guarded development and realistic preservation, and to some extent, though I don't like it, it means putting nature under a bell jar. The struggle is to accept the new terms that overpopulation and overcorporatization have imposed on us."

Redford's engagement with Sundance and with his unfinished and unfinishable work there is in many ways that of a parent's commitment to a child. "It takes constant vigilance and a sense of humor. Disappointment is a trap. It sometimes reminds me of how I felt when I sent my kids out into the wilderness for a day to experience solitude and I discovered that they had managed to sneak down to Provo and were watching television at their grandparents'. You can't look away too long, or someone will stick his finger into a socket. And you try not to take the setbacks personally, but it's hard not to." Redford doesn't like to quantify his success or failure any more than a parent would, but he considers Sundance "a working paradox that needs constant adjustment." Sometimes, though, the fatigue gets to him: "When you try to change the way people live—or worse, the way they think..." He doesn't finish the sentence.

Redford's experience at Sundance has, however, given him some excellent off-season training for the rigors of the film business. What some people imagine as glamour is for him, as an independent producer and director, a sense of embattlement. "By the time you finish with the budget, the lawyers, the agents, the managers, the publicists, the funding mechanisms and the partnership deals, you're so exhausted and overwhelmed that you almost don't have the energy to make the picture." It took him years to produce the 1992 film *A River Runs Through It*, and the

studios "wouldn't touch it," he says. "They told me it was a fishing movie." He has always identified with—and has often played—the upstarts, the mavericks and the underdogs, and he sees himself as a David standing up to Hollywood's Goliath. The Sundance Institute nurtures the kind of creative lab work in the arts and ensemble filmmaking that don't attract commercial backing, and the Sundance Film Festival, which is now "the biggest market for independent film in the world," was conceived as an alternative to the mainstream, he explains. "Hollywood," Redford notes dryly, "only pays attention to a film when it crosses the line to profit. The success of the festival has been a threat to that kind of corporate thinking."

As an actor, Redford has always been one of our most reluctant romantic idols. He has a strange flair for playing charlatans, probably because he is such a devoted student of the authentic. He loved the West long before he became a movie star, but the corrosive experience of celebrity—the lust of strangers, their envy, the

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loss of privacy—has only deepened his feeling of solidarity with a wilderness that others want to develop and possess. "Look closely at my film career," he suggests. "Nature keeps showing up, but what I've really been obsessed with is the concept of the Pyrrhic victory. *The Candidate* is a good example." The hero of that film, who turns out not to be one, is an idealistic young lawyer fighting the developers and the agribusinessmen—the establishment. He agrees to run for the Senate only because he's assured by his promoters that he'll lose the race. He has one ob-

jective: the freedom to speak out with no constraints about the misuse of resources, the hypocrisy of politicians and the exploitation of the environment by special interests. But he's seduced by his own success, his own rhetoric and charisma. "The paradox of that film," observes Redford, "is one that I've come back to on and off the screen throughout my career. Development for its own sake is just another form of winning for its own sake. America sets too much store in blood and trophies."

Sundance has been Redford's "personal Pyrrhic victory," and recalling his battles puts him, like an old warrior, in a mood of cheerful, even elegiac, belligerence. To Redford, the real estate developers have been the real villains, although he feels a special bitterness toward the opportunists on both coasts who, he says, "attached themselves to me like barnacles, paid lip service to the concept of an area without development, and the minute my back was turned, went about quietly buying up the land." Then there are the locals. "They have a long history of xenophobia, and they see me as an outsider—a movie star with a ski resort. We've never had any local funds, which has its upside: We've had to do things slowly, and by hand, and that has proved to be a valuable asset in the long run. But the jealousy, the intrigue, the pettiness and the resentment factor have been tremendous. I started a water district, which we needed desperately, and proposed a conservation plan. Not wanting to be lordly, I turned it over to a democratic board, which then threw every cog it could find into the process. So much," he says with a smile, "for trying to please everyone."

In his other lives—as an artist and an athlete—Redford would agree that downhill skiing has some great truths to teach, particularly for someone with an uphill personality. First, you must want to let go of the mountain. "Point your skis into the fall



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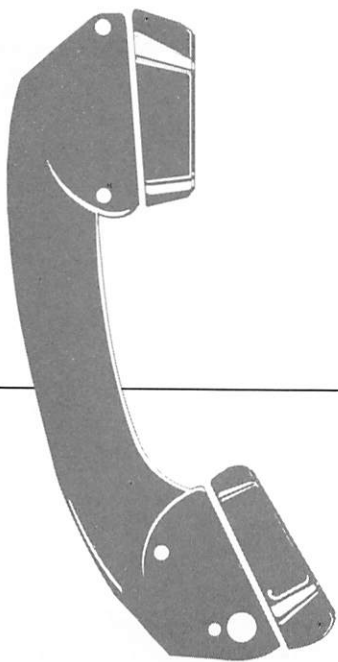
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line," they tell you, which means that in order to turn, to control your speed and your course, you have to surrender, absolutely, to gravity.

Grace on skis is a balance of surrender and control, which—with practice—the mind (though not the muscles) ceases to experience as tension. The narrator of *A River Runs Through It* makes the same observation in another context: "My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things, trout as well as eternal salvation, came by grace and grace comes by art, and art does not come easy."

When the state of grace eludes Redford in the art business or in the nature business, he does what he used to do in the old days. If it's the winter, he puts on his cross-country skis and goes out alone. If it's the summer, he saddles a horse and takes a *Washington Post* delivery bag to collect wildflowers. "I especially love the hour just before sunset. There's a sliver of moon; a bird lands on a branch and flies off again. You see the lights of Sundance below you, then you round the bend and there's nothing—no civilization, just the darkening mountains. Those ephemeral moments have a great resonance."

There are certain moments in history that share the same resonance, and that offer a glimpse of a world—a view—about to vanish, and those are the ones that interest Redford as a director. His next film, he says, will be a "character study" about the quiz show scandals of the 1950s. "It's a story about an end of innocence in our society. We ceased to believe that what we saw on television was the truth." *A River Runs Through It* was set in a very different period—the Montana of the 1920s—but it too was about a loss of innocence. "The era of the handmade was ending, the era of faith. Rural outposts like Missoula were paving their streets and installing electricity. The expanding population was pushing back the wilderness." And if you define the

American frontier as the place where purity begins to show the first faint signs of corruption, you can situate Redford's sense of home as an artist.

The ski lift at Sundance now runs all year, and in summer it brings hikers and bikers to the top of Redford's mountain. The view they find there is the most tangible result of, and reward for, his years of struggle. There are no condos and no parking lots, no power lines and no highways. Beyond the precipice lies a vast blue wilderness, an endless valley, and in the distance, a silver lake so luminous it looks molten. There are supposed to be no atheists in a foxhole, and at the other extreme, there are surely none on this ridge. Redford named it for his daughter Amy, and it is as much his gift to posterity as she is.

"I suppose I've gone through all the religions and rejected them," he says, "and in the end, this is what I come back to. The god of this landscape, of this nature, is the one who speaks to me. It's not a clear or even a hopeful message. Right now I'm on the fence about the future of the environment."

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Sometimes I'm an activist with a great sense of urgency, and sometimes I'm a fatalist who takes a very long and dark—a geological—view of time. At those moments I remind myself that nothing is meant to last: These mountains will be worn down; that lake will evaporate like a drop of water; we'll probably extinguish ourselves as a species. But then something new will happen. The sediment at the bottom of the Grand Canyon is five hundred and seventy million years old. When I'm feeling the weight of my problems, I go down and take a look at it. It improves your perspective." □

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